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ABSTRACT

This paper describes second-year outcomes in three New Jersey schools that participated in the Effective Demonstration Schools Project, a grants program that encouraged school-based improvement. The purpose of the three-year grants, awarded during the 1985-86 school year, was to improve students' basic skills performance through the application of principles associated with effective schools research. Data were obtained from site visits and interviews with teachers, administrators, and parents. The three schools included the Red Bank Primary School, Elizabeth School #2, and Atlantic City High School. Findings indicate that the schools differed in their project implementation approaches, but each utilized the principles of inclusion, information and imagination, and incentives. The schools included people in decision making, gathered information about the situation, imagined what could be, and utilized the incentives of success and money to sustain a vision of their schools as effective schools. (LMI)

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INSIDE THREE SCHOOLS: A MIDTERM LOOK AT THE EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS INITIATIVE OF THE NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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PREFACE

This paper has been prepared by Research for Better Schools, Inc. (RBS) at the request of the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDE). The paper describes activities in three schools associated with the Effective Demonstration Schools Project, a grants program encouraging school-based improvement. NJDE selected the sites to represent participating schools' diverse and thoughtful approaches to the challenge of the grant.

RBS staff spent one day at each of the three schools talking with teachers, administrators, and parents about their experiences. They were asked to reflect on the scope of their program, the team process, the use of data to inform decisionmaking, program impact, future plans, and what they have learned through their experiences.

This paper is the product of these interviews. It is designed to describe, rather than to evaluate, two years of school improvement in the Effective Demonstration Schools Project. The hope is that these descriptions will be of value to other schools interested in applying the strategies and intent of the program.

Special thanks go to the staff and parents of the three schools who told their stories and provided their insights so that others might learn.

It was clear that something was happening. A cat was all over Elizabeth School #2 -- in the halls, in classrooms, in the office, on bulletin boards, on shelves -- and everyone was talking about the cat. Meanwhile, a stuffed blue bear sat atop a filing cabinet in the Red Bank Primary School office, his chest swelling a T-shirt inscribed, "We are friends." And in Atlantic City, a photocopy machine hummed in the middle of the high school pool. But exactly what was happening?

What was happening at these schools, all participating in the Effective Demonstration Schools Project of the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDE), was activity to improve school effectiveness. The Elizabeth School #2 cat (CAT, an acronym for the California Achievement Test of Basic Skills), the Red Bank Primary School bear (a school mascot), and the Atlantic City High School pool (built for swimming but now refurbished as headquarters for teachers specializing in basic skills instruction) symbolize improvements these schools have undertaken to become more effective.

The Effective Demonstration Schools Grant Program

These efforts have been stimulated by grants authorized in the Effective Schools Program Act of 1985 (Senate Bill 419). According to the act, funds could be used to help selected schools improve students' basic skills performance through the application of principles associated with effective schools research. Schools chosen for the three-year grants eventually were to serve as demonstration sites for other schools.

The project goals for each site were:

- to strengthen instructional leadership
- to develop a school climate conducive to learning
- to maintain high teacher expectations of pupils
- to establish a clear and focused mission of mastery of basic skills for all pupils
- to provide ongoing assessment and monitoring of pupil progress
- to promote a supportive home-school relationship.

During the spring of the 1985-86 school year, the 17 participating schools submitted proposals outlining their preliminary plans for school improvement. Project schools varied a great deal, differing in terms of grade level, location, size, and plans for improvement. However, they all shared the intent to increase their effectiveness by working on the six common goals.

The specific plan for achieving project goals was left for each school to decide, subject to the review, approval, and guidance of NJDE. NJDE required that each assess local needs for improvement; develop comprehensive improvement plans through the collaboration of local administrators,

teachers, and others; and host visitors from other districts interested in the improvement process. NJDE provided some resources to start the job: training in team decisionmaking and planning, consultation, and money (an average award of $29,000 in the first year). NJDE encouraged the schools to make their own way toward increased effectiveness, but furnished on-going technical assistance and networked schools engaged in similar school improvement efforts.

How are these schools moving toward increased effectiveness? What can they tell about their two years with this school-based improvement effort?

Three Schools

This is the story of three project schools: Red Bank Primary School, Elizabeth School #2, and Atlantic City High School. It highlights major events and activities to show the unique approaches each school has taken to achieve project goals. Overall, the story suggests the variety of school improvement efforts supported by NJDE's Effective Demonstration Project. The story ends -- for the present -- by considering common themes illustrated by these three schools' experiences.

This story does not give a full account of all that each school has planned or done to address the six project goals. This story does not even include the whole tale of how any one school has approached any one project goal. These sketches simply begin to tell the tale.

Red Bank Primary School: Spirit and Success

Red Bank Primary School is one of only two schools in Red Bank. However, the size and location of this shore community mask its semi-urban quality. The community is racially mixed and economically tenuous, with about 70 percent of the school's children receiving free or reduced lunches.

Prior to the grant, school-community relations were strained. The community had rejected school budgets two years in a row. With few exceptions, parents were largely uninvolved in the school. When parents did come in contact with the school administration, one parent explained, they came prepared for war.

Red Bank Primary School applied for the Effective Demonstration Schools Project grant at the urging of the school district's coordinator of curriculum and staff development. During the first year of the grant, a new principal joined the 50 or so professionals on staff and the more than 500 children in pre-kindergarten through grade 4. A new superintendent arrived the following year.

The principal lightheartedly recalled Red Bank Primary School's first year with the Effective Demonstration Schools Project. "We jumped in with both feet and several artificial legs," he quipped. Staff and parents agreed.

A small group of staff working on project activities in the first year produced the early successes that fired up other staff. For example, one staff committee succeeded in convincing the board of education to purchase 30 more computers for the school. Another staff committee laboriously collected data on student attendance, discipline, and social service referrals, in order to persuade the board to fund a full time student assistance advisor for the school. Committee members came to the decisive board meeting in midsummer tired from their sustained exertions for this cause and pessimistic about the likely outcome. The large turnout of colleagues at their board presentation lifted their spirits somewhat. The board's approval of their request did the rest.

That success seemed to open the door for other staff to participate in project activities. According to the principal, "The number one thing the grant did for us was spirit -- a can-do, cooperative spirit. Now everyone has an idea or a plan." A new school spirit began to emerge.

After two years, staff and parents could see change. "The system works differently. It's not top-down any more," a staff member said. A parent elaborated, "We have school spirit we've never had before because parents, students, teachers, and administrators are working together." Another parent compared the change to a tree that had taken root and was growing on its own. The work of parents, students, and staff on two goals -- creating a climate conducive to learning and strengthening the school-home relationship -- illustrates the planting and growth of change at Red Bank Primary School.

The school spirit committee and project management team did much to nurture the change in spirit. They established a program to honor the school's "Students of the Month" with much coveted school T-shirts and a photo display. They set days when teachers delighted the children by wearing their school T-shirts. And they arranged a donkey-basketball game to promote heightened spirit among all students in the district. A videotape has preserved that match-up between school personnel and Red Bank's eighth grade students, all (more or less) riding on donkeys and (more or less) playing basketball. The stuffed bear played in the arms of the principal, amid cheering from students, parents, and community.

Parents have also contributed to the change in spirit at Red Bank Primary School. In fact, the school was recently recognized by NJDE for its outstanding efforts in home-school relations. Two years ago it would not have been a candidate for such recognition.

Parental apathy began turning to active interest when the school distributed a survey asking for parents' perceptions of school needs. Not only did 180 parents complete the survey, but attendance at PTA meetings jumped. Eventually, parents also claimed seats on the project's management team. They have since participated in budgetary decisionmaking and have taken the lead in trying to involve even more parents in the school.

Increased parental involvement at Red Bank Primary school can also be seen in the parents' resource room. The idea for a room stocked with

developmentally stimulating toys, books, and games parents could borrow originated with the school's early childhood staff. However, parents were soon involved in transforming a large storage area into a lounge where they could meet, browse, and linger over a cup of coffee. The project provided funds for the purchase of materials, while the school made available other funds for painting and furniture.

The resource room has amassed an inventory that includes books and pamphlets on child development and parenting, along with materials about local community services, such as hotline numbers for poison control and child abuse. As use picked up, parents and school staff decided to add information on coping with problems at home, such as death and divorce. Although only about half the projected materials have been acquired so far, parents have used what is there. For example, parents checked out almost 90 items from the resource room during a recent month.

Parents and community have also participated in another school activity, the annual off-site planning day. Held on a Saturday, the event is designed to gather ideas for the school's direction from all segments of the school community. Attendance more than doubled from the first to the second year, when parents made up fully one-third of the participants. Attendance was expected to double again the next year when representatives from Red Bank Middle School and from the regional high school would also be invited.

Coordinating the changes in school climate and home-school relations at Red Bank Primary School has been the responsibility of the project management team. The team itself has undergone change over the past two years. During the first year, the management team consisted of the curriculum director and two teachers who had helped prepare the proposal, the program leader, and the then-new principal. Interested staff formed committees around school priorities such as lunchroom, discipline and dismissal, school spirit, substitute teachers, and student counseling. Their job was to formulate tentative plans, discuss them with the principal, and report back to the management team. The team was restructured in the project's second year, adding committee chairs, one of whom was a parent, and grade level representatives to the team.

Throughout the first year, a relatively small core of staff members served both on the management team and on committees. The principal remembered how weary these individuals looked after shouldering that double burden. Yet their willingness to consider all ideas and to work hard on implementing the best ones assured others that their ideas would receive a fair hearing. As the project attracted more and more ideas, it also attracted more and more committee members to share the load.

As Red Bank Primary School completed its second year in the project, staff and parents looked ahead with an optimism born of experience. Their optimism was generated by a cycle of spirit and success that appeared to perpetuate itself. They counted among their successes board adoption of several project initiatives and expected adoption of several more. Still other initiatives appeared likely to continue without extra funding. These included the parent resource room and greater involvement of parents in

school activities generally, community input on planning, grade level representation on a school-wide council, and more refined data on student progress.

Another source of optimism was the perception that project activities could no longer be clearly distinguished from other activities at Red Bank Primary School. The project had succeeded in boosting the school's spirit -- "the hardest thing to document but the most important," the principal said. That spirit of cooperative action effectively stimulated change regardless of where a good idea came from or which funds paid for it.

The same spirit also brought hope that the challenges of the future could be met. Staff and parents identified one of these challenges as the need to help students feel good about themselves and good about school. Another challenge was to engage more parents in their children's education. Two more challenges were to sustain staff spirit and to maintain their early successes. Still another was to convince community residents that schools are worth their investment.

Something definitely was going on at Red Bank Primary School. And everyone, including the stuffed blue bear, was working to keep it going.

Elizabeth School #2: Consensus and the CAT

Elizabeth School #2 houses over 400 youngsters in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, and about 30 instructional staff. The commercial center of Elizabeth, New Jersey's fourth largest city, is only two blocks away. One especially notices, then, the trees lining the school's slate sidewalk and its well-trimmed front lawn. One is also struck by the graceful proportions of the brick building and the stonework detail around the entrance.

Despite appearances, Elizabeth School #2 is well acquainted with the problems often associated with urban schools. For example, 85 percent of the student population at Elizabeth School #2 receive free or reduced lunch. They are also highly mobile -- only 55 percent of students return from one year to the next. Temporary shelters for battered women and homeless families in the school's catchment area, as well as automatic reassignment of gifted and talented students to other schools, have contributed to this rate.

The school is also familiar with staffing problems. For example, attempts to obtain substitute teachers for the school have so frustrated teachers that they routinely divide the classes of absent colleagues among themselves. Finally, the effects of a teachers' strike early in 1987-88 have proved difficult to overcome. Though Elizabeth School #2 had put the episode behind it by year's end, staff conceded that the job action had considerably damaged relationships throughout the district.

The principal and basic skills resource teacher at Elizabeth School #2 learned about the Effective Demonstration School Project from the district's director of elementary education. They speculated that the school was encouraged to apply because it consistently scored below the district

minimum on standardized achievement tests, but was regarded as capable of following through on a change effort. The opportunity to try some effective school models appealed to them, so they drew up a preliminary plan.

This part of the story will focus on two goals central to the project at Elizabeth School #2. These goals were developing a climate conducive to learning, and establishing a clear and focused mission of basic skills mastery for all students.

"When we looked at our needs assessment, what lit up for us was that most people were concerned about school climate," the principal explained. In the project's first year, working on school climate meant making the breakfast routine more orderly and designing a school-wide policy for student discipline.

The problems with breakfast were the noise and wasted time before and after the meal. Before breakfast, students rushed from the playground to their classrooms and from their classrooms to the cafeteria. After breakfast, they hurried back to their classrooms, with all the tumult that energetic children can create.

Serving breakfast in classrooms, the ultimate solution, was suggested early in deliberations on the subject. However, it took months to dislodge obstacles and objections. Teachers resisted adding another duty to their responsibilities, grimly predicting how breakfast in classrooms would feed as many roaches as children. Custodians complained to their union about the need for more staff to deliver breakfasts to classrooms. The school district's lawyer rejected using volunteers to deliver the food, one possible alternative that was considered, because school insurance would not cover them. Late that first summer, the management team members agreed on a breakfast routine. Teachers would escort their students from the playground to the classroom, and custodians would deliver, and later pick up, breakfast trays that paid assistants had sorted.

One team member remembered how good she felt when the team finally reached consensus. "Once school started, though, it took about four to six weeks for everyone to feel that it was a good idea. When that happened, it changed the feeling of the school immediately." Teachers acknowledged that working out the solution was painful, but the payoff -- a better start to the day for children and adults -- was worth it.

The problem with student discipline stemmed from perceptions about the lack of uniform policy and procedures among teachers and a lack of administrative follow through. The management team addressed the problem by designing a school-wide policy. Just as with the breakfast routine, problem solving in this instance also took a long time even though the team had quickly agreed on a plan. "The first plan the team wanted was legally indefensible," the principal recalled. "The second plan was too cumbersome and time consuming to be practical." Despite the principal's view that it was a mistake to adopt the second discipline plan, he resolved to let the team try it. Teachers soon saw its defects and devised a third plan.

Teachers and the principal concurred on the merits of the third plan. This plan has promoted greater consistency in the way that discipline cases are handled and has helped reduce the number of discipline referrals. Still

operating at the end of the project's second year, this discipline plan had just two steps. When an incident occurs, a teacher records on a special referral form what the student did and what response the teacher made. The principal later records what action he took and files the form where the teacher can easily review it. The net effect was a contribution to the continued improvement in climate at Elizabeth School #2.

After initiating work on school climate, the staff turned to basic skills mastery for all students. They went after the CAT (the California Achievement Test in reading, language arts, and mathematics) with a vengeance. The management team introduced after-school tutorial and student incentive programs aimed at raising CAT scores at least to the district's standard. All over the school, a cat in boxing gloves glowered from bulletin boards and posters urging everyone to "beat the CAT."

The tutorial program provided three hours a week of intensive review and practice for those third through fifth graders needing extra help. Project funds paid for a staff of selected teachers. Parents, student aides, and New Jersey Bell volunteers also worked in the tutorial program.

But it was the incentives program the students found especially exciting. Incentives included parties sponsored by the project, individual ribbons, and class banners. Class banners were two pendants outside every classroom. The blank backs of the banners were displayed until a class achieved 100 percent attendance or 100 percent homework completion on a particular day. Students announced that achievement by turning the appropriate pendant over. The fact was also recorded on a school-wide form. Each full week of 100 percent attendance or homework earned individual students a prize ribbon and points toward the right to attend a school party.

These incentives had almost more than the desired effect at times. As the principal recounted with a twinkle in his eye, "It got so that we heard about one kid phoning another to say, 'You'd better have your homework tomorrow or I'm going to beat you up.'"

"We're in good shape," a teacher remarked, "because the goals were so clear and all our work is really on track." A climate conducive to learning and a clear and focused mission of basic skills mastery for all students have helped Elizabeth School #2 beat the CAT. From trailing the school district standard for the reading and math CAT, Elizabeth School #2 surpassed the standard after only one year in the Effective Demonstration Schools Project. The school also improved CAT language arts scores, going from below the district average, to matching an increased district average a year later. For at least one teacher on the management team, the most thrilling moment with the project was "when we bridged the gap on the test. The day the principal received the scores, he came up with a big smile and we went crazy. You know that goal of creating a safe and orderly climate for learning? It worked!"

A major factor in this success has been the school's commitment to building staff consensus. This search for consensus has now become a fundamental part of how the management team and supporting committees conduct themselves.

But by all accounts, it was not so at the outset. The principal and resource teacher reported that, in dreaming big dreams, the team at first mistook its power to recommend policy as the power to decide policy. The team also misinterpreted the principal's exercise of authority as obstructionism. A two-day training session with NJDE staff helped the team and principal see the value of involving the principal earlier in planning project activities. The team learned not only to check the feasibility and legality of its plans with the principal, but also to use conflict resolution techniques in team and committee meetings.

Working toward consensus on project plans has taken a great deal of effort, the resource teacher confided. "It is really a series of compromises. We negotiate and trim to get people on board." The process has required both analytical and interpersonal skills. "When we're examining a new idea, we try to think of the best possible consequences, the worst possible conse- quences, and alternatives." But the staff discovered that analysis alone was not enough. The process also required sensitivity to feelings. The resource teacher continued, "Everybody on the team feels it's important to be listened to, so we beat it and we beat it until we work it out."

Elizabeth School #2 ended its second year in the project still charged up to beat the CAT. Looking ahead to the third year, staff anticipated making only minor adjustments to their program. Looking past the grant period, staff anticipated that some changes funded by the grant would persist. For example, staff were confident that the school district would assume funding of their after-school tutorial. Although they did not expect the district to replace teachers' stipends for time spent on the management team and committees, they did expect those decisionmaking structures to remain in place. "Most people have found that it works, and that will carry people," team members explained.

Overall, Elizabeth School #2 expected to maintain its momentum toward effectiveness. A teacher reported, "The consensus is that we will improve our lot in this school." And, one suspects, they will find more than one way to beat the CAT.

Atlantic City High School: Bothering with Basic Skills

Like most places in Atlantic City, the high school is close to the ocean and not far from the casinos. Atlantic City proper and three smaller shore communities feed the high school that is staffed by 130 teachers and enrolls 1900 students in grades 9 through 12. The students tend to be highly mobile, with close to 50 percent enrollment turnover each year. Racially, economically, and academically diverse, the Atlantic City High School student body easily fills advanced placement classes and sophisticated independent study programs, at the same time it fills the school's remedial basic skills classes.

A fact of life for all students at Atlantic City High School is the New Jersey High School Proficiency Test (HSPT) they must pass before they can graduate. At Atlantic City High School, the test is more than a final

sorting device to determine who leaves with a diploma and who does not. The school uses the HSPT and related tests to place new students in courses at appropriate levels of difficulty, to track the progress of the 500 or so students who fail some portion of the test, and to structure and monitor those students' instructional experiences until the school can document their mastery of the requisite skills.

When they received the Effective Demonstration Schools Project application blank from the central office, the principal and the then-vice principal for instruction first had to decide whether they wanted to bother filling it out. As veteran administrators, they knew that past efforts at school-wide improvement had either lasted only a short time or had never really taken hold at their school. They believed this was due both to Atlantic City High School's size -- "a small city" compared to most elementary schools -- and to the autonomy enjoyed by individual department heads.

The administrators decided it would be worth the bother to apply for a project grant, with two understandings. One was that they would carefully target their efforts. The other was that they would address the crisis in basic skills the school was experiencing. "We knew we couldn't take on the whole school at one time. Since basic skills instruction was our number one problem, we figured that we would work with basic skills and then see if we could carry the project over to other areas. We also knew the effective schools research is a guide to effective schooling, not a prescription." The administrators developed their project proposal around earlier thinking they had done on the basic skills program.

The project that has emerged from the old Basic Skills Program at Atlantic City High School is a new High School Proficiency Instructional Program. The program has taken as its main goal the establishment of a clear and focused mission of mastery of basic skills for all students, and it has created a new system for delivering basic skills instruction. The new system has changed almost everything about what is taught, as well as how, when, and by whom it is taught.

Basic skills staff were introduced to the changes in basic skills instruction at a workshop in the fall of 1986. Here they received the first installment on the instruction guides some of their colleagues had developed during the summer. These guides essentially aligned the school's basic skills curriculum with specific HSPT reading and mathematics skills. All instruction guides included sample HSPT items; page references to the skills in various textbooks; practice tests; sample student records; and a week-by-week calendar for the introduction, review, and testing of each skill.

Misgivings about possible staff resistance to the tightly-structured curriculum soon evaporated. "Teachers did not perceive the guides as taking away their academic freedom," the former vice principal stated. "Instead, teachers thought the guides were the greatest thing going." They particularly welcomed the guides' specificity and clarity.

The new basic skills program included new mechanisms for monitoring student progress. In addition to using HSPT mini-test results to place students, Atlantic City High School drew from a bank of 10,000 test items to

provide practice in each HSPT skill area. Teachers in the project developed forms to plot the progress both of individual students and entire classes, and to help identify areas for review.

Other changes -- in the staffing of basic skills instruction -- also occurred early during the project's first year. One change was in the roster of basic skills instructional personnel. Not only did the staff now include 14 newly-hired compensatory education teachers, but it also included several veteran teachers who had previously taught Atlantic City High School's top students.

Under the new staffing arrangement, most compensatory education teachers were assigned a non-compensatory education teaching partner in the basic skills program. The school's administrators had determined who should be paired with whom in the eight partnerships. Beyond making clear that they considered each teacher a full and equal partner in the new set-up, the administrators decided not to interfere.

"At first there was some of this 'You collect the papers and I'll teach' in a few of the partnerships," the principal related. "Many avoided the issue altogether and started out by splitting the class between them." What assistance did the project furnish to help the partners adjust? The former vice principal responded simply, "Teachers worked it out themselves."

Administrators and teachers felt the pairings have worked well. Over time, most partners found ways to collaborate comfortably. At the very least, the arrangement has enabled teachers to intensify their contacts with individual students. In many cases, it has encouraged teachers to plan more carefully and systematically, and has stimulated them to bring out their best. The arrangement has also added to the camaraderie among all basic skills staff. "We've joked about ordering blazers with the project logo for our group," someone said.

Although the project did not buy blazers, it has used other means to show basic skills teachers they are something special at Atlantic City High School. A workspace (originally the school's indoor swimming pool, but currently the POOL--Pooling Our Organization for Learning), has been reserved exclusively for them. There they can share files of tests, curriculum, and student records. There they also have access to state-of-the-art personal computers and printers, and, most important, to a photocopier. While these amenities were considered necessary for meeting the project's student recordkeeping requirements, they have also demonstrated to teachers that the project and the administration care about them.

This climate of caring has extended to the relationship between basic skills teachers and their students. When school opened that first project year, students skeptically asked why they suddenly had two basic skills teachers instead of one. "Because you're that special, we care that much," teachers would reply. Students in the program have since come to believe it. They have repeatedly commented that teachers really do care about them and their mastery of basic skills.

Although administrators drafted Atlantic City High School's project proposal, a larger management team was convened as soon as the grant was awarded. The former vice principal acted as chair. Membership included heads of the English, mathematics, social studies, and science departments, but three of the four dropped out when the project's exclusive focus on basic skills became clear. In the second year, the team consisted of the remaining department head, seven teachers, the principal, the current vice principal, and the former vice principal as the central office's delegate.

Meeting about four times during the project's second year, the management team has functioned mainly as a sounding board for the current vice principal. The agenda for these meetings typically included a review of project activities and problems, reactions to new plans, and suggestions for future development. Between meetings, the vice principal checked informally with individual team members. These encounters usually consisted of impromptu conferences in the teachers' workroom or over a sandwich at lunch.

It is the vice principal and the basic skills teachers themselves who have exerted more influence than the management team on the direction of the project. The former vice principal indicated that this was a deliberate decision. From the outset, "the administration told the teachers, 'Here's the program.' The teachers helped define the program and activities, and the administration worked with teachers to implement them." The current vice principal has welcomed ideas for new activities from team members and basic skills teachers as long as they can produce a rationale and are willing to do most of the work.

Administrators saw the completion of two project years as a foundation for the future. Administrators expected to continue developing instruction guides, diagnostic and practice tests, and related curricular materials in the third year. They also anticipated adopting a uniform student recordkeeping system throughout the basic skills program. Representing the project to the rest of the school and increasing parental involvement were also scheduled as areas for focus during the third year. Other possible activities could include increasing the number of departments cooperating in the project, and extending selected features of the project to the school's regular instructional program.

Their systematic approach and precise recordkeeping have positioned the school favorably to use New Jersey's Special Review Assessment (SRA) process. SRA is an alternative method for assessing the proficiency of students who do not perform well on a paper-and-pencil test like the HSPT. SRA requires a school to show that a student has acquired a specific basic skill through performance in class, homework, or experiences outside of school.

Accomplishments of the first two years gave Atlantic City High School administrators confidence that the project's future prospects were good. Gesturing toward file cabinets that bulged with HSPT individual worksheets, class profile matrices, and SRA documentation, the vice principal observed how well the system has equipped has them to respond not only to students' instructional needs but to state monitoring requirements as well. The

principal ticked off three reasons why the project would continue even after he retired and the project money was gone: "It's successful. There's a need for it. And the teachers wouldn't let it die."

Themes from Effective Demonstration Schools

NJDE'S Effective Demonstration Schools Project has stimulated school improvement at Red Bank Primary School, Elizabeth School #2, and Atlantic City High School. At the end of two years, each school had adopted and acted on project goals. However, each took a unique approach to becoming a more effective school. These approaches varied as the conditions and needs of each school varied.

Yet common themes emerged despite the uniqueness of each situation and approach to school effectiveness. These themes are inclusion, information and imagination, and incentives. Examples from the three schools and advice from participants to those interested in effective schooling illustrate these themes.

Inclusion. Inclusion means giving the people who will be affected by a change effort a voice in determining what the change will be. But inclusion requires an authentic vehicle for participation. Examples are the team and committee structure at Red Bank Primary School and at Elizabeth School #2.

When people participate, they become empowered. At Red Bank Primary School, for example, taking responsibility for decisionmaking and seeing their decisions implemented energized teachers to take on even more. A role in decisionmaking also energized Red Bank parents, transforming their "griping into constructive involvement," as one said. The project at Elizabeth School #2 used "total school input from employees," which for them meant including even part-time teachers and custodians.

Being inclusive does not mean being indiscriminate. At Atlantic City High School, administrators thought hard about which teachers to select for the program, and about which teachers to pair in the partnerships. "Pick the best people," the vice principal counseled, "and let them have ownership over the instructional program."

Inclusion takes time. "Some people will chase the animal for two weeks, and then lose interest," disparaged Atlantic City High School's vice principal. However, to make real change requires commitment over a longer period of time. How long? Parents at Red Bank Primary School suggested that three years were not long enough. For them, four or five years would have been better. "To move people from inertia, go slowly, slowly, slowly," they advised.

Information and Imagination. For school effectiveness, information and imagination mean looking at a situation realistically but envisioning the future optimistically. Information enables participants to make a critical appraisal of how things are. A Red Bank Primary School parent urged, "Don't be afraid to be honest with yourself about how bad the reality is when you

start out to think about change." Teachers from Elizabeth School #2 put it another way. "We accept that not everything works all the time," they said. "You have to analyze your school to pinpoint actual problems in order to know where to work."

Imagination allows participants to frame an optimistic response to their realistic appraisal. Framing that response relies on envisioning an effective school in the future, regardless of current realities. For example, at Red Bank Primary School where parents felt excluded, the management team envisioned a school where parents felt included and important. At Elizabeth School #2 where student achievement fell below the district minimum, the teachers visualized a future in which they and their students would beat the CAT. At Atlantic City High School where basic skills instruction was in crisis, administrators imagined a revitalized staff and program.

The will to envision an optimistic future seems tied to participants' beliefs about future possibilities. A belief fundamental to the development of an effective school is that all children can learn. In order for students at Elizabeth School #2 to improve their basic skills performance, for example, teachers had to believe that kids could achieve, their team leader stressed. "Keep talking about it," she exhorted. "Teachers must impart the expectations to kids. Teachers should accept no excuses, and they should provide help."

If participants lack the beliefs that suggest an optimistic future, they can act as if they held such beliefs nonetheless. Their own actions may then bring about a new reality they had not thought possible before. Atlantic City High School provides an example. At the start of the project, teachers despaired of ever seeing improvement in the extremely low HSPT scores of some students. Nonetheless, the teachers taught as if they believed those students could learn. In time, those students did learn and their HSPT scores improved. The experience taught teachers to expect improvement from all students and gave them the will to envision an optimistic future for these students.

Incentives. Sustaining a vision of school effectiveness requires incentives. A strong incentive at all three schools was early evidence that the change effort was making a difference. Participants disagreed, however, about how to achieve successes early enough to carry people and the vision forward.

Some said to start small. The principal at Red Bank Primary School, for example, suggested narrowing program scope in order to increase the odds of accomplishing something concrete and visible early in the process. "We spread ourselves too thin the first year," a parent mused. "Don't bite off more than you can chew." Similarly, Atlantic City High School administrators recommended narrowing program scope by focusing on a part of a high school rather than on the whole.

Others suggested starting big. Some Red Bank Primary School parents urged, "Don't be afraid to stretch yourselves too thin and to experiment. We took chances because the grant gave us the opportunity to be creative."

Despite their suggestion to limit program scope, Atlantic City High School administrators also suggested stretching the limits for envisioning new possibilities under the guidance of "an unshackled instructional leader."

The promise of funding helped entice the three schools to accept the challenge of becoming effective demonstration models. Money also helped get teachers involved. At both elementary schools, for example, the modest stipend for service on the management team and committees reinforced the project's importance and the value of teachers' contributions.

The actual amount of money in school grants or teacher stipends is a relatively minor issue. "It doesn't have to cost a million dollars," a teacher said. The point is that money facilitates commitment and action. A little money sometimes goes a long way toward stimulating and sustaining school effectiveness.

Conclusion

The Effective Demonstration School projects at Red Bank Primary School, Elizabeth School #2, and Atlantic City High School differed in their approaches, but exemplified the use of inclusion, information and imagination, and incentives. These schools included people in decisionmaking; they gathered information about what was and imagined what could be; and they used the incentives of success and money to sustain a vision of their schools as effective schools.

As these schools completed two years in NJDE's Effective Demonstration School Project, other schools prepared to follow them. For those still unsure about undertaking a school effectiveness effort, a teacher at Elizabeth School #2 challenged, "It doesn't matter where your school is. That's no excuse. You <u>can</u> make changes, if you devote yourself to making it a better place for children and adults."